

LIVING YOUR LIBRARY'S BRAND

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As a public library director, I was so passionate about marketing my local library that I was asked to give presentations about library marketing around the state. Inevitably after such a presentation,

I would have a few people come and say things like “Loved your ideas, but how do I get my (insert the appropriate: staff, director, immediate supervisor or board of trustees) to let me do these types of things?” Or, “I have tried a, b, and c, but it just didn’t work. What else can I do?”

It was difficult for me to answer their questions. First, how could someone not want to promote the public library - an organization financed by the community, for the community? Secondly, these marketing techniques don’t happen overnight, so if things aren’t working after trying them consistently for a period of time, it’s time to re-work the strategy. Although I would eagerly try to encourage the nay-sayers, the disheartened, and the “ye-of-little-faith” librarians, not being able to offer a perfect marketing solution had always bothered me.

Eureka!! While flying home from a recent vacation an idea hit me! As I eased my seat back, put on the headphones and began channel surfing, I discovered a collection of in-flight audio clips about “branding.” In a nutshell, branding is the emotional impression that comes to a customer’s mind when they think of a company or product name. According to industry experts,¹ successful “branding” increases profitability by:

- Attracting loyal, long term customers inclined to pay premium prices
- Creating a predisposition to buy products and services
- Enhancing a company’s ability to enter new markets and product lines
- Forming barriers to any competitors seeking to enter service areas
- Attracting qualified employees who tend to have lower turnover rates

- Increasing efficiency and effectiveness
- Cushioning against negative developments

Since my husband joked about needing the “Universal Library Card” during our vacation, the prospect of globally marketing “The Library” got me all excited. This is exactly what libraries need. Wouldn’t it be great for people around the world to be able to recognize a global library brand? Something catchy! Something inspiring! Something that gives them all the warm fuzzies!!! Yes, yes, I have seen the universal blue symbol – but frankly it just doesn’t do it for me!

For millions of people “Starbucks=Coffee”, so why couldn’t “Library = ?”? No matter what type of library: public, private, academic or school, don’t they all provide “the activity of getting x product/service to y population?” A universal library brand could create the ability to attract and retain loyal patrons, increase circulation and program attendance, and boost employee and trustee morale. Libraries all over the world could capitalize on the word “LIBRARY” as a logo itself, thus banning together to promote the “word” like a brand name. Library administrators would like the cost effectiveness of such a plan and everybody in the world would know what libraries did. They would flock to our institutions just by seeing the trendy logo. All our marketing headaches would be cured!

Well, not exactly. After giving the idea much thought, I realized that it had three major problems. First of all, branding is more than just flashing a company logo around. Geoffrey Randall, author of *Branding: a Practical Guide to Planning Your Strategy*² claims that the key issues of branding are:

- Branding is a fundamental *strategic* process that involves all parts of the firm in its delivery. It is about marketing, but is not confined to the marketing department.
- The brand must deliver *value*, and the value must be defined in *consumer* terms.
- The brand has a continuing *relationship* with its users; this may change over time, but the organization must always work to maintain it.

- Because competition is getting fiercer all the time, ... branding must be *continuously adapted* so that it is both effective and efficient.

Secondly, in today's world, terms like global economy and global society are everywhere. But are all the people in the world really becoming identical? In a 2001 A. C. Nielson study of 200 "billion-dollar brands," only 43 actually could be defined as global. Seventy-eight percent of the largest brands are still only regional. Although producers would love global brands in order to cut costs, consumers aren't as interested. Sure, when traveling it's great to be able to find a product you use at home half way around the world. But is it really a necessity to a native of that area or just a convenience for you when traveling? Communicating a universal brand to a diverse audience can lead to very different interpretations of the product.³ Remember the story of the ill-fated Ford Nova? Few sold in Spanish speaking countries where "No va = no go"!

In order for patrons to perceive value and confidence in "The Library" brand, all libraries would have to offer the same high level of customer service across the board. Unfortunately, although it is changing, not all libraries believe in or are able to provide, the same level of customer satisfaction. Inadvertently, by being unique institutions with similar yet different mission strategies, libraries could actually drive away customers by not all being able to consistently offer what is promised.

LIBRARY BRAND POTENTIAL

From a marketing perspective, libraries have great potential! Think about the library's assets. It's easy to take them for granted, yet for-profit marketing executives would kill to have:

- **Great Product.** Need I say more?
- **Existing Clientele.** Libraries already have patrons actively making a choice to use them.
- **Staff Permanence.** Many library staff members are members of the community they serve; some even have lived there all their lives. Who better to understand the community's unwritten communication pipeline?
- **Longevity.** Not many current for-profit businesses have been around as long as the local library.
- **Location.** Some libraries are still in their original locations, right in the heart of downtown! Those that have moved found locations which were more convenient for patrons.
- **Adaptability.** Weren't libraries supposed to become extinct because one day everybody would have a computer and access to the Internet? Instead, we have embraced technology and used it to our advantage.
- **Publicity Potential.** Unlike for-profit businesses, libraries can easily publicize, not advertise. Local papers love doing human-interest stories.

In the world of marketing, branding has been creating quite a stir! So much so, that the American Library Association's latest campaign for American Libraries actually features the registered trademark "@your library™" This five year campaign focuses on "fostering a new understanding of the value of libraries and librarians to our democracy."⁴

Yet, before you run out and physically brand everything with the @your library™ logo, your own existing logo, or your individual library's name as a logo, stop and take a hard look at the impression your library has created for itself in the community. Start by examining the organization from the inside out!

LIVE THE BRAND

When marketing a product, a traditional "4 P" method is used - product, price, promotion, and place. If we look at the role of a library as a provider of service and not as a product, three additional elements - people, process, and physical evidence should be added.⁵

Branding consists of all the people that represent the brand and involves the efforts of the entire library. Marketing works when you identify your target market and get them to realize that they need what you have. If the patron does not completely believe that the library really offers what it claims to offer in its promotion, he will never claim it as his own. According to Leslie de Chernatony, professor of brand marketing at Birmingham University Business School, "Brands are delivered by people to people. The emotional values of the brand come about because of the staff. A weakness of some organizations is their communication strategies proclaim ideas about emotional values, but interactions with the staff don't reinforce these."⁶

MISSION STATEMENT

Dust it off! Display it! Do it! A mission statement is a unifying proclamation of the library's common purpose. It should be inspiring, bold, and to the point. From student pages to trustees, from clerks to directors, from janitors to catalogers, all those associated with your organization need to be continually reminded of the mission and encouraged to strive to uphold it. If your current mission is dull and lifeless, the time it takes to rejuvenate it will be well worth the trouble!

SPREAD THE LIBRARY STORY WITHIN

Often, libraries hire staff and just assume that the new staff member understands what kind of tradition the library has within the community. It's the library,

right? It has been there forever; everybody knows we check out books.

While a college intern at Walt Disney World, before I was assigned to my employment location, I attended three days of Disney Tradition Training. It was a class designed to immerse new cast members (employees) in the Disney Way. We learned how Mickey Mouse was created, the basic history of the Disney theme park, Disney lingo, names of characters plus directional orientation (the two finger point), and how to be a cast member when on stage. At Disney, no matter what your position, anytime you were dressed in the Disney uniform you were “on stage.” Within these three days, we learned quickly to live the Disney tradition!

Now I realize that no one has three days to devote to each new employee, but there are subtle ways of letting the staff learn about the library. If you are lucky to have the library’s history in written form, assign it as required reading. Consider a weekly trivia contest or “Fact of the Week.” Current library employees might be surprised to know that the current spacious library started in a 100 square foot room of the INTERURBAN station. Or, that citizens held a “Book Shower” to start the new library. The more that they know about the library, the more employees will accept it as their own and share it with the community.

LIBRARY STAFF = LIBRARY AMBASSADORS

Anyone on staff at the library is a walking billboard for the library. Either on company or personal time, the actions or words of a staff member are associated with the library.

The frontline people with the most patron interaction are those that should have the best sense of how to convey the brand image to the patron with each encounter. They are the integral part of the service process of a library that adds the extra value to the patron. They are not only in place to meet and anticipate the needs of the patron, but are there to communicate the concerns or problems of patrons to the administration.⁷

Even student pages can become active frontline employees. Training them to spot a confused patron in the stacks would not only benefit the rest of the staff, but empower the page with the ability to take pride in their mundane task. Who better to help find materials than the person who actually puts it away? When I applied for the Internship at Disney, I distinctly remember while ranking my work preferences, I ranked janitorial staff as dead last. What I didn’t realize at the time was that that type of position (role) allowed for a great deal of independence and guest interaction. Janitors are found mingling with the guest themselves and the first ones approached when a guest has any questions. “What time is the Main Street Parade?” “Where can we get those funny little mouse hats?”

“Which way to Space Mountain?” Since my time at Disney, I have heard that the front-line custodial cast members refer to themselves as “Super Greeters with Brooms.”

Don’t forget about the employees in administration, technical, and janitorial services either. Even though they do not have much daily personal contact with patrons, their commitment to the institution and awareness of what is going on up front for the patrons permeates not only their outlook of the library as a great place of employment, but helps when casually spreading the library’s message while on personal time.

ACTIVE BOARD MEMBERS

Many may not think of a Library Trustee as part of the public library’s workforce, but they are. While attendance at all the board meetings is great, the most beneficial member of a library board is one that actually believes in his/her library’s mission and is enthusiastically seeking opinions from the community about their library. Even though they may not be handing materials to patrons in a physical sense, trustees interact with patrons and non-users on a daily basis. Library trustees should not only be savvy communicators of the library’s mission to the community, but they should also act as scouts looking toward the future for potential problems and ways to avoid them ahead of time.

CURB APPEAL AND LIBRARY ATMOSPHERE

If you have ever tried selling your house, you know how important curb appeal is. What library wouldn’t love a large parking lot or fancy landscaping? But in this case, it’s more basic than that. How do non-users view your library? Do they even know that it is a library? As a director of a newly remodeled Carnegie library, I could have started a side business selling stamps. At least once a week, someone would mistake our library as the Post Office until we were finally able to put up a sign. A non-user once told me that although she did not currently use the library, she was always fascinated watching the young children race excitedly to the library doors. Even though some members of the community may not utilize your library, they do see from the outside what may or may not go on inside.

Take every opportunity to get those non-users in the door! My first public speaking engagement upon becoming a library director was to talk to the Lion’s Club about the future of libraries. I consulted *Library Journal*. I made my overheads. I had a lovely dinner and then got up to the podium. Almost instantly, I realized that they were all being very polite and nodding in all the right places, but had no idea what I was talking about. I literally remember my words just floating in the area above them. I stopped right in the middle of my speech and asked how many of them had been to the

library recently. Obviously, I was not given the response I was hoping for, so we bundled up and trotted down the street to the library. I listened to library stories from a group of individuals who had not used the library in years, but wanted to share their experiences with the library as youngsters and parents. That night I learned what one part of the community wanted to see as the future of "their library." More importantly, the next morning, I learned the value of how coffee shop talk affects non-user perception.

No matter how big or how small your library is, when a patron steps through the front door, there is an instant feel in the atmosphere. If there is no sense of staff camaraderie and customer service, it is unlikely to be an inviting place where patrons feel welcome. No amount of comfy chairs and high priced computer stations mask an unappealing ambiance. Patrons can't be expected to attend great library programming if they have to first quietly slink past the stern clerk at the circulation desk.

BENEFITS OF A STRONG LIBRARY BRAND

The immediate effects of long term, consistent branding are obvious: more non-users would become patrons, and more patrons would tell their friends! What about the effects that can't be statistically compiled?

In an ever-increasing society where time is a valuable commodity, having a strong library brand helps distinguish the library from other available options in the community. Having patrons with strong emotional ties and the need to be part of the library will help them make the decision to visit the library instead of the bookstore, Internet, or take part in other leisure activities.

If the general geographic area is well aware of and believes in the Library's brand, those that live in unserved areas will feel like they are missing out on something worthwhile (the buzz) and want in on the action - thus enhancing the library's ability to gain additional service areas. In addition, having a strong library brand when it comes time to dissolve a contract with an unserved area would work to the library's benefit. In both cases, traditional non-taxed individuals could lead the fight for library service, which they feel they need to have or would greatly miss.

For those of you who actively seek alternate means of funding, either from local governmental units or foundations, having a strong library brand would greatly increase your chances of obtaining such funding over those organizations that don't actively brand. It is very empowering to be able to walk into such a meeting and know that the library brand, which is so saturated within the community, has caught the eye of the funding committee. No one wants to give money to some-

place they don't know about. Let's not forget to mention the importance of knowing that the library's scouts (trustees) had already used their political connections to speak with committee members.

Most for-profit businesses have to buy advertising space and would salivate over the kind of publicity some libraries boast. The Summer Reading Program is just a gold mine of publicity! Children, reading, programs! Next time you hit up a donor for donations, think about the benefits of how associating themselves with the library would give donors a co-branding edge. Donations and sponsorships show the softer, civic-minded side of a company.

Since fifth grade, I wanted to be a librarian. But for some reason, even back then, I knew that librarianship was, for some reason, not considered cool. You know that "look" non-users give you when you tell them you are a librarian or work at a library. Well, with good library brands in place, it would be easier to recruit individuals to our profession and erase the old stereotype. They will want to join us as information specialists (professionals and non-professionals) enthusiastically working in stimulating environments.

CONCLUSION

Over the years, workshops have been offered on customer service and marketing. Mission statements and long range plans are grudgingly written and then put aside. Library staff and board members have quietly served their time.

Now, instead of thinking of them as separate occurrences, start thinking of them as a symbiotic relationship - all relying on the other to succeed. Without a good product, an organization will never survive and without a good brand, customers will never internalize the need to be a part of it! In order to enhance a library's main function of providing information to the public in today's society, libraries must take an active role in their own survival. This is especially true when tax dollars are tight. A little bit of strategic and creative branding could go a long way! Go out and Live Your Library's Brand!

NOTES

¹ Melanie Harwood. "Branding on a Budget." *Community Banker*. April 2002: 24-28. MasterFILE Premier. [Online database] EBSCO Publishing. Accessed 15 May 2002. Available: <http://www.epnet.com/ehost/login.html>.

² Geoffrey Randall. *Branding: a Practical Guide to Planning Your Strategy*. (London: Kogan. 2000), 2-3.

³ Alan Mitchell. "Few Brands Can Achieve a Truly Global Presence." *Marketing Week (UK)* 7 February 2002: 32-33. MasterFILE Premier. [Online database] EBSCO

Publishing. Accessed 2 March 2002. Available: <<http://www.epnet.com/ehost/login.html>>.

⁴ “About @ Your Library™ . (2002). American Library Association: 3 January 2001. <https://cs.ala.org/@yourlibrary>. (2 May 2002).

⁵ Randall, *Branding*. 95.

⁶ Kevin Thomson. “Stomach-Churning Strategies.” *Brand Strategy*. 23 April 2002. **Business Wire News**. [Online database] EBSCO Publishing. Accessed 14 May 2002. Available: <<http://www.epnet.com/ehost/login.html>>.

⁷ Jennifer McFarland. “Branding from the Inside Out, and from the Outside In.” *Harvard Management Update*. February 2002: 3-4. MasterFILE Premier. [Online Database] EBSCO Publishing. Accessed 2 March 2002. Available: <<http://www.epnet.com/ehost/login.html>>.

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